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Literary fiction readers understand others' emotions better, study finds

Research by US social scientists found that those who read novels by the likes of Toni Morrison and Harper Lee do better on 'theory of mind' tests. Genre fans do not

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Emotionally intelligent ... readers in deckchairs at the Guardian Hay festival in 2009. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

Literary fiction by the likes of Salman Rushdie, Harper Lee and Toni Morrison helps improve readers' understanding of other people's emotions, according to new research - but genre writing, from authors including Danielle Steel and Clive Cussler, does not.

Academics David Kidd and Emanuele Castano, from the New School for Social Research in New York, put more than 1,000 participants through the "author recognition test", which measured exposure to fiction by asking respondents to identify writers they recognised from a list. The list included both authors and non-authors, and ranged from writers who are identified as literary, such as Rushdie and Morrison, to those such as Cussler and Steel who are seen as genre authors. The participants then did the "reading the mind in the eyes" test, in which they were

asked to select which of four emotion terms most closely matches the expression of a person in a photograph.

In a paper just published in the journal *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, the academics reveal that those who had recognised more literary fiction authors in the list were better at inferring others' feelings, a faculty known as theory of mind. Genre fiction is defined in the paper "by its focus on a particular topic and reliance on relatively formulaic plots", while literary fiction is defined "more by its aesthetic qualities and character development than its focus on plot or a particular set of topics and themes".

"Results indicate that exposure to literary but not genre fiction positively predicts performance on a test of theory of mind, even when accounting for demographic variables including age, gender, educational attainment, undergraduate major ... and self-reported empathy," they write in the paper, *Different Stories: How Levels of Familiarity With Literary and Genre Fiction Relate to Mentalising*. "We propose that these findings emerge because the implied (rather than explicit) socio-cognitive complexity, or roundness of characters, in literary fiction prompts readers to make, adjust, and consider multiple interpretations of characters' mental states."

Castano and Kidd had previously conducted research in which they gave participants extracts from literary or genre novels to read, and then assessed how well they could recognise emotions in others, finding that those who read the literary fiction extracts scored highest. Their latest research set out to look at the emotion-recognition responses of those who choose to read either literary or genre fiction in their daily lives.

"We thought it was important to try and measure a lifetime's exposure to fiction, and how it affects these processes," said Castano.

"In those 2013 experiments, we focused on the question of causation - can reading fiction cause improved theory of mind, at least in the immediate context of reading? We found evidence that it can, but this effect was only observed when we assigned participants to read literary fiction. It did not appear when they were asked to read popular genre fiction," said Kidd.

This time round, said Kidd, they did something new. "We examined patterns of author recognition in two large (each more than 850) independent samples using a technique called factor analysis, and we found evidence of two clusters of authors that could be classified as generally literary or generally popular genre writers," he said. "We then tested how levels of familiarity with each type of fiction related to theory of mind performance ... The results across three independent samples consistently showed that familiarity with literary fiction, but not genre fiction, reliably predicts better theory of mind performance."

Their latest evidence, said Kidd, shows that "not all fiction draws on the same psychological processes in the same way", and that "over time, habitual reading of literary fiction is associated with differences in interpersonal perception that are not associated with regularly

reading genre fiction”.

The academics are keen to stress that they are not claiming a superiority for literary fiction. “What we are saying is that there are different ways of telling a story, and they have different impacts on the way we perceive social reality. Literary fiction, we say, tends to challenge social categories - the characters are category-resistant ... Popular fiction, on the other hand, uses types of characters which help us immediately understand what is going on. That’s how we learn about the social world - how we build our national and cultural identities,” said Castano.

“This is not to say that reading popular genre fiction cannot be enjoyable or beneficial for other reasons - we suspect it is,” agreed Kidd. “Nor does the present evidence point towards a clear and consistent distinction between literary and popular genre fiction. Instead, it suggests that the broad distinction between relatively complex literary and relatively formulaic genre fiction can help us better understand how engaging with fiction affects how we think.”

The academics hope that their findings will have implications for the study and teaching of literature, as well as in helping to improve theory of mind in those who lack it. “It doesn’t mean you can give Don DeLillo to an autistic child and they’ll be fine - but may help us to understand how theory of mind process[es] could be fostered in individuals with known deficits,” said Castano.

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